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Indulgence

Prosecutors took a tougher stand against Jesse Jackson Jr. than his wife, Sandi, because they viewed him as the one who enabled the couple's seven-year \$750,000 spending binge in which campaign dollars were spent on luxury goods, celebrity memorabilia, spa treatments and even a trip to Disney World.

Feb. 24, 2013

Feb. 24 — Prosecutors took a tougher stand against Jesse Jackson Jr. than his wife, Sandi, because they viewed him as the one who enabled the couple's seven-year \$750,000 spending binge in which campaign dollars were spent on luxury goods, celebrity memorabilia, spa treatments and even a trip to Disney World.

Top federal prosecutor Ronald Machen Jr., in an interview with the Tribune, said the ex-congressman was the “most culpable” of the two Jacksons and added: “He enabled this entire thing to take place. He was the bigger name. When people gave money to that campaign, they were giving money because of him.”

On Wednesday, Jackson Jr., a U.S. representative until he resigned in November, and his wife, a Chicago alderman until she resigned last month, made tearful, back-to-back guilty pleas to felony counts in a courtroom blocks from the Capitol. Both could land in prison.

A day after the pleas, Machen, 43, U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, sat down with the Tribune to take stock of the case, saying he was struck by the duration of the crimes and the couple's extravagant tastes, featuring a \$43,000 men's Rolex, a mink cashmere cape and Michael Jackson's fedora.

“It's indulgence in the excess,” he said. “It's so over the top.”

Jackson Jr.'s spending and cover-up led to a guilty plea Wednesday to one felony

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the case “until more recently,” the prosecutor said.

Machen was asked to address two key questions: What might have motivated the two? And what made them think they'd get away with it?

The prosecutor, noting that he'd been involved in many such cases, said greed — and habit — came into play. At some point, the behavior becomes so commonplace that people “don't view it as theft because they become so used to it. The more you do it, the easier it becomes just to continue to do it. And when it's not questioned or brought to light, you can just kind of go down this path, and that's what happened here.”

He declined to disclose when the probe of the Jacksons began or what triggered it.

The Jacksons “did get away with it for a long time,” he said, but crimes like the Jacksons’ “do leave financial trails.”

Speaking about his office's investigations in general, he said, “We do get tips. We investigate those, and if there's something there, we follow up vigorously.”

He said the Jackson probe was run out of Washington, not in Chicago, with FBI agents and IRS criminal investigators, and he said his office was “very aggressive, very creative” in its tactics.

An aspect that made this case particularly unusual was that while federal authorities were investigating Jackson Jr., he was undergoing treatment for mental problems. His medical leave was announced last June, when “exhaustion” was cited. Later it was announced that Jackson Jr. suffered from bipolar disorder.

After Jackson Jr.'s guilty plea, his defense lawyer said his health problems were a factor in the crime spree.

Machen said he “has an open mind” about what the defense will argue at sentencing

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couple's wrongdoing. None of them has immunity, according to Machen, who said authorities still were assessing the other players and their roles.

Were the six cooperating witnesses? “I don't want to comment on that,” he responded, saying that was not a “safe assumption.”

Machen said the judge will have discretion in meting out sentences, and more about the Jacksons will be included in the confidential presentence reports done by a federal probation officer, who will “really dig deep” into their lives, assessing their behavior and “what sort of future risk they could be.”

He said that while the criminal charges showed Jackson Jr. “at his absolute worst,” he's “always shown remorse, and I think that's one of the reasons he came forward so quickly” and cooperated with federal investigators. Sandi Jackson, he added, “worked to resolve this quickly.”

Machen, from suburban Detroit, has a top academic pedigree. He attended Michigan's elite Cranbrook School, Mitt Romney's alma mater; Stanford, where he was a walk-on wide receiver on the football team; and Harvard Law School.

He knows Chicago well. His late grandfather, Harold, who died before he was born, was a Chicago police officer, and in childhood, Machen spent about a month every summer in Chicago visiting his grandmother and cousins. His father lives in the Chicago area.

Public corruption is a focus of his job, in part because D.C. is a company town and the company is the government. In three years on the job, he's overseen more than 100 such cases. Regarded as a driven, high-energy and hands-on prosecutor, he said elected officials should be held to a higher standard of conduct because when they commit wrongdoing, people lose faith in democracy.

When he goes after people in high places, his concern for young people is top of

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Married with three sons, Machen said he was sensitive to the fact that the Jacksons' children are 12 and 9. They were a factor in structuring the couple's plea deals, he said. "What we tried to do was fashion a plea that we thought did justice, that was appropriate for the conduct, but also recognized the situation ... involved real people, real young people and families."

He said he has met and respects civil rights leader the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who appeared with other family members for the tearful pleas on Wednesday, which Machen called Jackson Jr.'s "day of reckoning."

"Every prosecution I have," he said, "there is somebody's kid. You divorce the two. He's done a lot of great things in his life, but his son has done wrong now."

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